

Seven Days



Raisa Nemikin



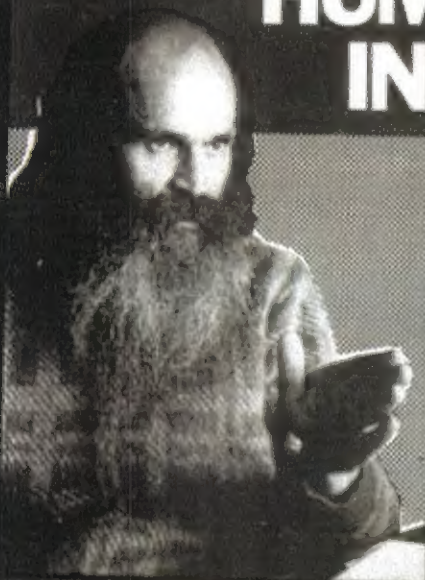
Andres Figueroa



Lee Otis Johnson

AMERICAN DISSIDENTS

HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE U.S.A.



Leonard Frank



Ben Chavis



Susan Saxe



Fred Hampton



Lolita Lebron and Marilyn Buck



Leonard Peltier

AMERICAN DISSIDENTS

Wide World



Karlston Armstrong is doing 25 years for blowing up the Army mathematics research center at the University of Wisconsin in 1970 at the height of the anti-war protest.

LNS



In 1968, Lee Otis Johnson, a SNCC organizer, was sentenced to 30 years for passing one joint to a narc. When he got out on parole, he was popped burglary. He is now in the Ramsey State Prison Unit, where he is doing 7 years.



An all-white jury condemned Gary Tyler to death in 1975. The Louisiana Supreme Court refused to reverse his conviction, despite the recanting of the chief witness.

U.S.A.: political prisoners, by any other name

By Peter Biskind

While Jimmy Carter makes merry with violations of human rights in the Soviet Union, it has been conservatively estimated that there are at least 200 political prisoners cooling their heels in American jails.

President Carter, in his well-publicized human rights address to the United Nations, graciously conceded that the United States was also open to criticism in the area of human rights but pledged "to deal with our deficiencies quickly and openly." What kinds of violations was the president thinking of? U.S. restrictions on travel by foreigners, said Carter in the same speech, as well as withheld visas from "those who disagree with us politically."

Carter's speech was sandwiched between the jailing of Raisa Nemikin and Maria Cueto, for refusing to testify before a grand jury investigating alleged bombings by a Puerto Rican nationalist group, and the conviction of black revolutionary Assata Shakur for allegedly shooting a highway patrolman to death in 1971. The president's innocence may be excused, perhaps, on the grounds that the United States steadfastly maintains that there is no such animal as an American political prisoner. Unlike countries such as Indonesia, which frankly admits to imprisoning some 50,000 people for their beliefs,

the United States treats dissenters and revolutionaries as felons.

What is a political prisoner? On the one hand, all prisoners who are poor and/or nonwhite, victims of class and race, can be considered political prisoners. "Once you understand that the criminal justice system is inherently political, that its purpose is not justice but pacification—to

"It has been conservatively estimated that there are at least 130 political prisoners in American jails. . . . The largest group is composed of Native Americans, the aftermath of Wounded Knee."

keep things the way they are, to get people dangerous to the status quo off the streets—then you see that all crime has a political dimension," says Robert Bloom, an attorney who defended Richard (Dhoruba) Moore (see page 25).

On the other hand, most radical lawyers would agree that not all crimes are political. "All of us on the left haven't faced the complexity of these issues fully," says

Elizabeth Schneider of the Center for Constitutional Rights. "You can't demand the release of everyone from jail and demand more police protection for the poor at the same time. There's a contradiction."

Amnesty International, the human rights organization, maintains a worldwide list of political prisoners that is restricted to "prisoners of conscience," those who are arrested because of their beliefs, race, or religious origin. It excludes those who either advocate or commit acts of violence. This definition is too narrow, because many political prisoners have done both. Not all political cases are frame-ups. Mark Holder, linked by police to the Black Liberation Army, indeed committed the crime he was convicted of: bank robbery. But Holder used the proceeds of the robbery to provide free breakfast food, medical care, and clothing for the poor. He insisted that he did not steal the money but rather "expropriated" it. "It doesn't matter whether he or she did the alleged crime or not," says Gerald Lefcourt, an attorney who defended the Panther 21. "If the motives are political, if the people are struggling for social change, it's a political action."

Most dissenters and revolutionaries have not committed crimes; however, treating them as felons makes a lot of sense from the government's point of view. It has



Susan Saxe is doing 12 years for manslaughter and armed robbery in connection with a bank robbery in 1970 in which a cop was killed.



Ben Chavis, of the Wilmington 10



Leonard Peltier is on trial for the 1975 slayings of two FBI agents on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

"The unhappy distinction of being the longest held political prisoners in the United States belongs to the five Puerto Rican nationalists, Oscar Collazo, Lolita Lebron, Andres Figueroa Cordero, Rafael Cancel Miranda, and Irving Flores."

always been reluctant to make political changes, especially since it got burned in a series of notorious conspiracy trials in the late sixties and early seventies.

"Charging people with criminal offenses is a good tactic," says Texas attorney Cameron Cunningham, "because it isolates them, makes it harder to build a political defense, and scares off supporters. Everyone assumes Abbie Hoffman's case isn't political since he's wanted on a cocaine charge. Ramsey Muniz, twice the Raza Unida candidate for governor of Texas, is doing five years on a drug bust. When people hear that, they assume he's guilty."

Amnesty International lists only 17 American political prisoners. Larry Cox, an Amnesty spokesperson, admits that this figure is low. "In the U.S., people are never clearly arrested for political crimes," he explained. "It takes a lot of work to sift through the criminal charges to find out if a case is genuinely political."

Many American political prisoners, especially if their crimes are sensational (like Susan Saxe's or the SLA's) have high visibility and enjoy extensive media coverage and vigorous defense committees. Others do not. The largest category of often overlooked political prisoners seems to be Native Americans, many convicted in one or another of the 130-odd trials that followed Wounded Knee. Another large group is composed of those connected to the Black Liberation Army, an organization supposedly dedicated to assassinating cops. Then there are the grand-jury cases—people jailed for refusing to cooperate with grand juries (20 in the last two years)—and an assortment of people left over from the antiwar movement of the sixties. There are a large number of blacks, like the Ayden (North Carolina) 11, rotting in Southern jails, little known beyond their local areas. Then there are an incalculable number of people who have been politicized in prison and punished for it with solitary confinement or extra sentences.

Here is a sampling of political prisoners in American jails. For every one cited, there are a dozen who remain obscure and forgotten, victims of "justice," and too poor to buy their way out.

Five Puerto Rican Nationalists

The unhappy distinction of being the longest-held political prisoners in the United States belongs to five Puerto Rican nationalists: Oscar Collazo, Lolita Le-

bron, Andres Figueroa Cordero, Rafael Cancel Miranda, and Irving Flores. On November 1, 1950, Oscar Collazo and Greselio Torresola fired on Blair House, then the temporary residence of President Harry Truman, in protest against government retaliation against a nationalist uprising in Puerto Rico. Collazo was condemned to death, a sentence later commuted by Truman to life imprisonment.

Four years later, on March 1, 1954, Lebron, Cordero, Miranda, and Flores entered the gallery of the U.S. House of Representatives and sprayed the startled Congressmen below with a hail of bullets. Lebron unfurled a Puerto Rican flag and shouted, "Free Puerto Rico." Five Congressmen were wounded, none seriously, and a large plaster eagle lost some feathers. The four nationalists were protesting the position the United States was then taking before the UN—that Puerto Rico was not a colony but a "free associated state."

Twenty-three years later (27 for Collazo), all are still in prison.

The Wilmington 10

On February 3, 1976, after the U.S. Supreme Court turned down their appeal, Rev. Ben Chavis, the 29-year-old director of the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, began a 29-to-34-year sentence for supposedly firebombing a grocery store in Wilmington, N.C., in 1971, during a period of racial strife that followed attempts to integrate local schools. Chavis was accompanied to prison by nine other activists (eight young men and one woman), who have become known as the Wilmington 10. Together, they face an aggregate sentence of 282 years. All maintain their innocence. Said Chavis: "We are victims of racism. We have been persecuted for political activity, not for criminal acts."

Since the ten were jailed, three key prosecution witnesses have recanted, and Rev. Eugene Templeton and social worker Patricia Rhodes told the *Charlotte Observer* that Chavis and four other defendants were at Templeton's house when the firebombings occurred.

The Wilmington 10 have appealed to have their conviction overturned. In a letter to President Carter, Chavis, referring to Carter's human rights crusade, pointed out that "we are equally as well 'prisoners of conscience.'"

The Wilmington 10 are on the Amnesty International list of U.S. political prisoners.

Gail Madden and George Merritt

In the aftermath of the Newark, N.J., riots in 1967, in which 23 blacks were shot to death by law enforcement officers, traffic cop John V. Gleason, Jr., entered the black community of Plainfield, N.J., with his gun drawn. As a crowd gathered, rocks were thrown, and Gleason shot a black youth named Bobby Lee Williams. A gang of angry people attacked Gleason and beat him to death.

Bobby Lee Williams survived three bullet wounds to be arrested and convicted of assaulting an officer. Twelve people were indicted for the murder. The key prosecution witness, who implicated six of the twelve, was legally blind and without glasses when the beating occurred. Six other witnesses recanted during the trial. One witness was on heroin, and another was in jail in an adjacent county on the day Gleason was killed.

Of the twelve, ten were acquitted. Gail Madden and George Merritt were convicted. Only one of the six eyewitnesses could identify Madden, who weighs 300 pounds. That witness was standing 560 feet away—almost the length of two football fields.

A court of appeals unanimously reversed their convictions. They were tried and convicted a second time. Merritt's second conviction was overturned by the New Jersey supreme court. He is now out on appeal bond, awaiting his third trial. Gail Madden, seven years later, is still in prison.

Richard (Dhoruba) Moore

Dhoruba belonged to the Black Panther Party and was tried in 1971 with 20 other Panthers. The Panther 21, as they were called, were all acquitted of more than 140 charges, including conspiracy to bomb department stores. Dhoruba was rearrested for robbing the Triple-O Social Club in the Bronx on June 5, 1971. The police claimed that the machine gun he used in the stick-up was the same one used to shoot two cops, Nicholas Binetti and Thomas Curry, three weeks earlier. The Binetti-Curry shooting was the first of a series that police attributed to the Black Liberation Army. Dhoruba was indicted on two counts of attempted murder.

Although there were numerous eyewitnesses to the shooting, none could identify Dhoruba; one even failed to pick him out of a lineup. The description they provided did not fit him. The only witness against him was a woman named Pauline Joseph, who had been diagnosed as a "paranoid schizophrenic" and suffered from hallucinations. The first trial ended in a hung jury.

During the course of the second trial, it emerged that the police had suppressed a statement by Joseph to the effect that Dhoruba had not shot Binetti and Curry. Despite this disclosure, the jury convicted

Dhoruba. He was sentenced to 25 years to life.

Imari Abubakari Obadele

Imari Abubakari Obadele is the president of the Republic of New Africa (RNA), a black nationalist group that claims sovereignty over several Southern states. In 1971, FBI agents and local police raided RNA headquarters in Mississippi. A cop was killed in the shoot-out that followed. Obadele was not present at the time, but he was nevertheless indicted on a number of charges, including levying war against the State of Mississippi. The state charges were dropped, but he was rearrested on federal charges—conspiring to assault a federal officer—and convicted in 1973. At last report, he was in jail in Madison County, Mississippi. Obadele is on the Amnesty list.

The Ayden 11

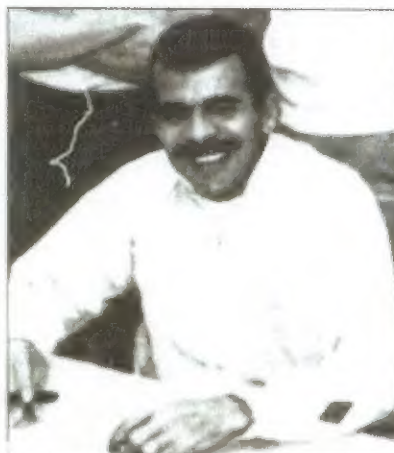
Five years ago in Ayden, North Carolina, black students moved to integrate Ayden-Grifton High School. The Ku Klux Klan threatened to bomb the school, and shortly thereafter probably did so (a bomb went off in a school bathroom), although the police chose to blame the bombing on the blacks themselves. There were no fingerprints, no eyewitnesses, and no physical evidence to link the explosion to anyone. The police arrested a 13-year-old boy and threatened to kill him if he did not name the "others." He named 11 others, all active in the civil rights movement. They were all convicted. Five are still in prison. Michael Epps, brother of Reginald Epps (of the Wilmington 10), has been in prison since he was 15.

Marilyn Buck

In February 1973, Marilyn Buck was charged with two counts of purchasing ammunition under a false name. She bought two boxes, with approximately 45 rounds in each. It was Buck's first offense. She was convicted in October 1973 and sentenced to five years on each count, to be served consecutively.

According to her attorney, Susan Jordan, "Anyone else, on a first offense, would have gotten probation. It was not a serious crime. They socked her with ten years because she was political."

Buck was then indicted on identical charges in four other states—all, says Jordan, for buying 100 rounds of ammunition. When it was disclosed that she had been the subject of a national security wiretap, she appealed. After three and a half years, her appeal was turned down. The opinion was written by Judge Lawrence Lydick, a former law partner of Richard Nixon's. □



Michael Deutsch

Rafael Cancel Miranda was one of four Puerto Rican nationalists who sprayed the U.S. House of Representatives with bullets in 1954.



Michael Deutsch

Andres Figueroa Cordero, another of the nationalists, is dying of cancer. The Puerto Rican FALN has demanded that he be released.



Michael Deutsch

Two generations of political prisoners: Lolita Lebron (left) and Marilyn Buck (right) in Alderson Prison, West Virginia.